

Message Text

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ACTION AF-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 DIWY-01 PA-02 PRS-01 USIA-15 CU-06

AID-05 OES-07 DHA-02 COME-00 EB-08 IO-14 /072 W

-----021855 132321Z /70

R 121640Z AUG 77

FM AMEMBASSY ABIDJAN

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4877

UNCLAS ABIDJAN 8034

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: SOCI, IV

SUBJECT: WOMEN'S ROLE IN IVORY COAST

BEGIN SUMMARY: DURING HIS VISIT TO ABIDJAN AUGUST 2, COORDINATOR FOR POPULATION AFFAIRS, MARSHALL GREEN HAD A USEFUL AND PRODUCTIVE ONE-HOUR MEETING WITH JEANNE GERVAIS, MINISTER FOR WOMEN'S AFFAIRS. MME. GERVAIS DISCUSSED THE TRADITIONAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN IVORIAN WORLD SOCIETY, PROGRESS MADE IN EDUCATION AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE. END SUMMARY.

1. TRADITIONALLY, WOMEN HAVE BEEN SUBSERVIENT IN IVORIAN VILLAGE LIFE. A MOTHER RISES EARLY TO WALK SEVERAL MILES FOR WATER, PREPARES BREAKFAST, WORKS IN THE FIELDS USUALLY CARRYING A SMALL CHILD, PREPARES LUNCHEON AND RETURNS TO THE HOME TO PREPARE DINNER AND CLEAN UP WITH THE REMAINS OF THE WATER BROUGHT THAT MORNING. EVEN IN AGRICULTURE, WOMEN ARE OFTEN GIVEN SHORT-HANDLED IMPLEMENTS WHILE MEN CAN WORK ERECT WITH LONG-LANDLED HOES. MME. GERVAIS SAID THE WAY TO ESCAPE THIS ONEROUS ENVIRONMENT IS CLEARLY THROUGH EDUCATION AND GOIC HAS MADE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION SINCE INDEPENDENCE. IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS, NOW ATTENDED BY A SOLID MAJORITY OF IVORIAN CHILDREN, 50 PERCENT OF STUDENTS ARE GIRLS. THIS FIGURE IS SOMEWHAT LESS IN CONSERVATIVE MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN THE NORTHWEST. (COMMENT: IVORIAN PRIMARY EDUCATION RECEIVED GREAT EMPHASIS AND EDUCATION TELEVISION IS AVAILABLE IN ALMOST EVERY IVORIAN COMMUNITY. STANDARDS OF TELEVISED EDUCATION ARE PROBABLY LOWER THAN SCHOOLS IN URBAN AREAS, BUT IMPRESSIVE NONETHELESS).

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2. GIRLS ALSO MAKE UP 50 PERCENT OF SCHOOL POPULATION IN FIRST YEARS OF SECONDARY EDUCATION, BUT AFTER PUBERTY TOO MANY BECOME PREGNANT AND REVERT TO TRADITIONAL SOCIAL ROLES. PROPORTION AT UNIVERSITY IS PROBABLY NO MORE THAN ONE QUARTER WOMEN. SEX AND

SOCIAL EDUCATION MUST THEREFORE TAKE HIGH PRIORITY.

3. MME. GERVAIS DESCRIBED THE ORGANIZATION OF THE IVORIAN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION (AFI) OF WHICH SHE IS PRESIDENT. AFI IS ORGANIZED NATIONALLY WITH CENTERS IN EACH OF 133 SUB-PREFECTURES, AND WORKS CLOSELY BOTH WITH GOIC AND PDCI, SOLE POLITICAL PARTY. SEVERAL PRIORITIES HAVE BEEN SET FOR LOCAL CHAPTERS FINANCED BY GOIC, PDCI AND SOME LOCALLY GENERATED MONIES:

(A) HEALTH AND HYGIENE: CLASSES ARE ESTABLISHED FOR ELEMENTARY HYGIENE, NUTRITION, PRENATAL AND CHILD CARE, AS WELL AS COOKING AND OTHER HOUSEMAKING SKILLS. SPECIAL COURSES AT LARGER CENTERS ARE ARRANGED FOR MID-WIVES (SAGE FEMME) WHO PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN VILLAGE SOCIETIES. EVEN ELEMENTARY HYGIENE CAN BE ENORMOUSLY EFFECTIVE IN REDUCING INFANT MORTALITY FROM CAUSES SUCH AS TETANUS FOLLOWING UMBILICAL SURGERY.

(B) COOPERATIVES. WOMEN TRADITIONALLY CULTIVATE FOOD CROPS FOR THE FAMILY -- YAMS, EGG PLANT, PEPPERS, ETC., A FEW OF WHICH ARE SOLD BY INDIVIDUALS. MEN MORE OFTEN WORK IN COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE WHERE ORGANIZATION OF COOPERATIVES HAS PROVED EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE. AFI HAS HAD SUCCESS IN FOUNDING COOPERATIVES FOR WOMEN TO POOL RESOURCES, ORGANIZE SALES, ARRANGE FOR CHILD CARE AND PURCHASE MODERN IMPLEMENTS. IN RECENT YEARS, WOMEN HAVE MOVED INTO COMMERCIAL AGRICULTURE -- NOTABLY IN SUGAR PLANTATION IN NORTHEAST AND AFI HAS PRESSED FOR THEIR INCLUSION IN COOPERATIVES

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OFTEN AGAINST RESISTANCE FROM CONSERVATIVE MASCULINE SOCIETY.

(C) AFI HAS ORGANIZED ARTS AND CRAFTS CENTERS WHERE WOMEN CAN BE EMPLOYED AND BROUGHT MORE DIRECTLY INTO THE MONEY ECONOMY.

4. POPULATION PLANNING. MME. GERVAIS VOICED THE OFFICIAL GOIC POSITION THAT IVORY COAST IS UNDERPOPULATED AND MUST INCREASE THE BIRTH RATE, AS WELL AS IMPROVING HEALTH CARE DELIVERY. HOWEVER, SHE NOTED THAT IN URBAN AREAS DUE TO INCREASED SOCIAL SOPHISTICATION AND HIGH COST OF LIVING, NUMBERS OF CHILDREN PER FAMILY ARE DROPPING SHARPLY. (MME. GERVAIS IS THE MOTHER OF 7, BUT HER CHILDREN HAVE LIMITED FAMILIES TO TWO). SHE SPOKE ENTHUSIASTICALLY OF PROSPECTS FOR SPACING CHILDREN TO RESULT IN DECREASED INFANT MORTALITY BUT MENTIONED TRADITIONAL MASCULINE PRIDE IN LARGE FAMILIES AS A SERIOUS SOCIAL OBSTACLE.

5. MME. GERVAIS IS A CHARMING AND OBVIOUSLY DEDICATED PERSON. ALTHOUGH SHE HAS LITTLE POLITICAL CLOUT, AFI ENJOYS FULL SUPPORT OF GOIC AND PARTICULARLY OF PRESIDENT HOUPHOUET-BOIGNY. WOMEN IN IVORY COAST HAVE COME A LONG WAY SINCE INDEPENDENCE AND THOUGH PROSPECTS PROBABLY NOT AS BRIGHT AS MME. GERVAIS SUGGESTS, EFFORTS BEING MADE ARE CONSCIENTIOUS AND WELL DIRECTED.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
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Executive Order: N/A
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Original Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
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Previous Classification: n/a
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
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Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
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Status: NATIVE
Subject: WOMEN'S ROLE IN IVORY COAST BEGIN SUMMARY: DURING HIS VISIT TO ABIDJAN AUGUST 2, COORDINATOR FOR POPULATION AFFAIRS, MARSHALL GREEN HAD A USEFU
TAGS: SOCI, IV, (GREEN, MARSHALL), (GERVAIS, JEANNE)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/4735105c-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009